

## Back to Basics: Meditations on Quality vs. Quantity in Outdoor Education

by Andrew McMartin

How well do you know the environment around you? Do you know where your water comes from? Where is the closest stream, seep or vernal pool in relation to your home? Do you know what lives there and relies on that source? How about the closest plant to your front door? Do you know the different plants growing in the nearest lawn or patch of grass? Are any edible or medicinal? How are they prepared? Do you know which way the wind was blowing today? How many times did it change direction? What does this indicate about upcoming weather? (For more examples of these challenging questions, visit [www.wildernessawareness.org/PDFs/TouristTest.pdf](http://www.wildernessawareness.org/PDFs/TouristTest.pdf).)

There was a time when all of our ancestors knew the answers to these questions. This was basic awareness, and knowledge of place was an integral part of life. Today, few people in Western culture are *aware* of the environment that surrounds them, and fewer still understand the importance of it to the balance of life on this planet. Modern lifestyles and culture have led us away from our connection to the Earth. The majority of Western populations rely on food and water sources they do not know. People buy what they want from a supermarket and spend their extra time lost in reality TV shows, rather than reality itself. The more dependent we grow on technology, the less we use our senses, bodies and minds, to the point that they are showing signs of atrophy. Westerners are less healthy and less active than they were 50 years ago. And, according to Louv (2005), children today have a more profound relationship with technology than with the environment around them.

As outdoor educators, the cards seem stacked against us. Possibly the only elements in our favour are instinct, youth and the

environment itself. Kids are closer to their natural instincts than are adults; they have unlearned less (Brown Jr., 1989). The wonder that a small child demonstrates with her hands sunk in the mud of a backyard puddle is not as distant a memory for a teen as for an adult. Often, when youth get back into wilderness they rediscover the wonder and curiosity that filled them as toddlers. I believe that one of the most powerful things an educator can do is provide the opportunity for students to spend time outside, living lessons rather than just reading about them. Yet, as facilitators we can do more than provide time outside. I see a need for increased experience-based education *about* the out of doors, rather than just education *in* the out of doors.

Through this we can help students develop a closer connection to their place, perhaps leading to a generation that values natural places for their inherent value, rather than their monetary value (Evernden, 1993). Unfortunately, outdoor education and, in particular, backcountry experiences often fail to facilitate a quality of experience, instead opting for a quantity of them.

Throughout this paper, I use my own personal experiences to illustrate how many backcountry expeditions emphasize quantity rather than quality of experience. I discuss why this is counter-productive to the goals of outdoor education in many settings, and how this leads to the gap that I often encounter between what is practiced and what is preached. From there, I suggest questions for the reader to reflect upon and different ways of knowing that have helped my own expedition experiences with students. I provide a "day in the life" itinerary to better illustrate some of my points. Concluding this paper are some final reflective thoughts about the potential consequences of continuing to

teach and lead expedition experiences based on quantity rather than quality.

### What is Quality in Outdoor Education?

I should begin by defining “quality” of experience as I have encountered it. To me, quality experiences show a depth and range of sensory experience. They involve many different ways of knowing an experience, and promote knowledge of place in the way that you know your home. Think of your last expedition: How well did you know each place you stayed? With whom did you share these places? What plants, animals, trees or insects did you encounter?

In modern outdoor expeditions, facilitation by instructors and guides leans toward leadership, activity-based skill and group dynamics. These are positive aspects of expedition experiences, but they tend to be emphasized at the expense of everything else. Are these really the reasons that people return to the wilderness? From my perspective, most of us return to the wilderness because we love the challenges and adventure it often presents, and we love the physical, mental and spiritual calm that it provides. So why is it that we know so little of what we profess to love?

Unfortunately, when people head out into the backcountry it is very difficult for them to leave their cultural norms at home. Our routines and daily schedules, for example, as Tom Brown Jr. (1989) suggests, are difficult things to escape — especially within the confines of Western society. Although backcountry expeditions grant us this opportunity, it is rarely taken advantage of. After years of canoe tripping, I began to recognize that my days in the wilderness were very much a mirror of my days in the city. Routines were formed, and everyone on the trip fell in line. Wake up, pack, eat, travel, travel, eat, travel, travel, unpack, eat, sit around the fire, go to sleep, REPEAT! Replace “travel” with “school/work,” and “sit around a fire” with “sports” or “TV,” and this becomes a

good representation of my days in the city. There are some very real similarities to these two types of days. They are ruled by schedule and, because of this, I missed most of what I was really there for. Think back to the experiences you remember vividly, to the moments in your life that you tell others about. Were these moments scheduled? Were they even planned? Was time or destination a part of the equation (Brown Jr., 1989)? My most vivid memories are the ones that just happened. They were the times where I was completely lost in the moment, concentrating fully on the “now.” These are the moments when we are most aware, the moments uninterrupted by the past or the future, allowed to exist as such because of a severe lack of things to do or places to be (Hartmann, 2004). What are we teaching students if our days all look the same?

In my first years leading expeditions, the landscape was given little say in how we lived our days. We had a predetermined schedule, and we stuck to it. All our days were similar, seeing a variety of landscapes and knowing little about any of them. In later experiences, allowing the wilderness to dictate parts of or entire days provided an opportunity to develop a relationship with our surroundings. Rather than exerting my will upon the land, I learned to try to allow the landscape to present activities, adventures and a depth of experience for everyone involved.

### Do You Practice What You Preach?

The journey is the destination, right? This has become a mantra for backcountry learning and adventure education in recent years. As I continued to run into this cliché, I started to question whether anyone understood it. I wondered how we could preach this, yet spend our days applying schedules and routines to the places where we were supposed to be leaving it all behind. These things seem to be at odds with one another. I began to realize (and continue to do so frequently) how hard it is to escape my cultural perspectives

and biases. The only method I have discovered to help me do this is to continually face some hard questions, and be open to the idea that I might not like the answers. (I was once told that one of the greatest failures in life is the failure to ask questions and I had been failing to ask meaningful questions of myself.) Below I offer you some of those questions, asked of me and which have helped me to see more clearly what I feel is important:

- What do you believe in?
- What is your purpose?
- Do your actions fit your beliefs?
- Are you achieving your goals?
- Do you live the lessons you teach? How?
- What is it that makes you truly happy?

I would like to think that most people teach and work in the outdoors because they love and believe in what they do. If that is true, then we owe it to our students and our purpose to integrate meaningful introspection and self-analysis into our daily lives. Do not be afraid to ask similar questions of students. Children have their lives laid out for them earlier and in more detail than ever before (Louv, 2006). They are rarely encouraged to ask difficult questions of themselves or think with any depth about the world around them and how they can positively influence it. So how do we change? Asking these questions helped me to understand the chasm between what I wanted to achieve and what I was achieving with students. Yet I still had no idea how to develop more meaningful experiences.

Approximately five years after I started leading canoe trips with kids, I had the pleasure of co-leading with a true student of life. He had a passionate interest in all things wilderness and had a vast *native* knowledge of the land. By native, I mean that his knowledge was a kind that made the wilderness his home. He had a passionate interest in traditional skills and was a student of a wilderness survival school in New Jersey called the Tracker School, run by Tom Brown Jr. ([www.trackerschool.com](http://www.trackerschool.com)). As I began to learn more, my eyes were opened to some very different ways of leading, teaching

and existing in the wilderness. I began to see tremendous value in the teaching styles of traditional cultures living close to the Earth and found ways to integrate some of them into my expedition experiences. Many of these styles are illustrated in the pages that follow.

### **Different Ways of Knowing**

I certainly cannot provide a formula of how to develop more meaningful experiences for students, but I can recommend some general themes, taken mostly from the lessons of Tom Brown Jr. (1989), that have helped me immeasurably:

- Reduce quantity and increase quality. Whether this takes form in reducing expedition traveling distances or creating time to explore the world around you in depth, a focus on quality can create wonderful and powerful learning experiences. Throw away watches and let the land dictate a little more. Eat when you are hungry, sleep when you are tired, and play to exhaustion. In essence, kill routine. Some of the best canoe trips I have been a part of averaged one kilometre per day. We lived by the sun and the days were always full. Whether students were out on a nature sit, making traditional shelters for the night, writing, collecting wild edibles or materials for baskets or fishing lures, or just out adventuring in unstructured space and time, they were learning through direct experience with different aspects of the natural world.
- Slow down! In fact, sit down! Find a place to stop and let the rush of the day leave you. Start to look around you and lose yourself in the world that you normally walk by every day. This can be a natural environment or an urban jungle. Concentrate only on your senses and on the present moment. Try to leave thoughts of the past and the future behind and challenge yourself to get to know the area directly around you. Awareness of place will be exponentially increased if teachers

and students have a single sit spot to visit daily throughout the year. It can be anywhere! Every place has much to teach (Brown Jr., 1989).

- Incorporate multi-sensory experiences. To simply read about making cedar tea does not mean you know a cedar tree or the tea itself. By coming into contact with this tree, feeling its bark and roots as you make baskets and cordage, seeing and smelling its greens, sitting and listening to the way it moves in the wind and the wildlife that inhabit it throughout the year, and finally, tasting the delicious tea that it produces, you begin to know this tree. Challenge senses daily with blindfold exercises, tasting, touching and smelling a variety of different natural materials to see how sensitive you can become. Sensory experience and repetition are ways we learn the lessons that do not get forgotten (Brown Jr., 1989).
- Lose your inhibitions and become a child again! Teach the value of mystery and through this empower the wonder and awe that small children experience daily. Think back to when you were a kid and what it was that drew you outside. You didn't have to go far to find wonder back then. Why is it that we feel we have to now? Recreate those things with children, for them and for yourself! Get muddy again, build forts or shelters, eat plants and collect your own food. Stop letting your ideas (positive or negative) of what an experience will be like keep you from *actually* experiencing it. You'll never know what it's like until you try it (Brown Jr., 1989).
- Change yourself! Learn to live the things you say and believe. Often this change in itself becomes the teaching (Hartmann, 2004). As Tom Brown Jr. regularly states to his students: "I could pick my boy's face out of a thousand while blindfolded." How well do you know the things you say you love? Be interested in life, passionate about the places that are meaningful to you, and give these places the time and attention that they deserve.

### A Day in the Life

Based upon the preceding ideas in this paper, I consider it necessary to illustrate how I have used them to increase quality and depth in my own expeditions. Primarily, I try to live these teachings through the use of traditional and primitive skills, and use these to facilitate more sensory experiences for students.

Traditional skills and philosophies are just one method — of many — to incorporate different ways of knowing. They are how I have experienced success. For success to be achieved, considerable experience on the part of the instructor is required. If you can not demonstrate or teach skills that work, your efforts will be less than effective; so, spend time learning, researching and experimenting with these skills.

Note that the sample day described below is packed with activities in an effort to illustrate a variety of lessons that could contribute to a backcountry trip, rather than to encourage anyone to attempt to fit this many activities into a single day. Using friction for fire making, for example, can be a multi-day lesson that includes fire structure, plant and material studies for tinder and parts, as well as assembly and technique for methods like the bow drill, hand drill, fire saw, flint and steel, or even just matches! Remember, the point is to spend quality time doing a few things and, thus, knowing them well.

Try these out:

- Wake up with first light and go to an individual "sit spot" to catch the busiest time in the forest — the hour surrounding sunrise.
- Come back from a sit, get a fire going with a bow drill (friction fire) and cook breakfast and brew some pine needle tea.
- Gather together to give thanks for the meal. This does not have to have any specific religious connotation but simply acknowledges the sacrifices made for us so that we can live another day. Eat.
- Go for a short walk to find a spot to build a primitive shelter. On the way collect

materials for basketry and for coal-burning bowls, cups and spoons. Build the shelter.

- Come back and make lunch. Share a short story about thanksgiving and respect for the Earth. Eat.
- Take a siesta!
- Go for a walk and look at various plants and trees using field guides to identify and learn about edible and medicinal properties. Talk about proper harvesting techniques and good *caretaking* (i.e., taking care of the land, and leaving a place better than it was found), and reiterate messages of thanksgiving as we take life to nourish ourselves.
- Track wildlife and learn about the interconnected lives that inhabit the area while you gain insight into wildlife patterns and behaviours.
- During the middle part of the walk, introduce animal stalking and movement techniques, and continue with a silent hike out along a lowland swamp. Compare and discuss the difference in your awareness between the first and second half of the walk.
- Go for a swamp crawl . . . a chance to play around in the mud and get up close with some of the wildlife that inhabits this ecosystem. Discuss aspects of traditional camouflage and play hiding games with students on the way back to the campsite.
- Get another fire going with the use of a bow drill and prepare dinner and tea. Give thanks and eat!
- Hang out around the fire; work on coal-burning bowls, spoons or baskets from the day's collection of cedar bark, birch bark and various rootlets.
- Tell stories.
- Fall into bed exhausted, while one adventurous student crawls into the shelter for the night.

Keep in mind that, throughout this sample day, little distance is traveled. Most activities involve nothing more than short wanderings from the campsite. There should be plenty of

time for relaxing and spending time in and with the environment. While staying busy all day, never rush and always allow time to check out interesting spots as they present themselves. The environment should dictate what is learned by providing certain materials and allowing students to start projects that engage them in sensory experience. This sample day is packed with different activities that illustrate a variety of learning opportunities presented by the natural surroundings. Not every day will look like this, nor should you expect that it should. Crucial emphasis must be placed on including unstructured time, allowing the natural surroundings to stimulate fun and imagination.

### **Summary: Reflective Thoughts on Quantity over Quality**

A planetary crisis embraces everything from the personal and social to worldwide, but in spite of an occasional flurry of lip service and 'let's pretend's' concerning the avalanche of disasters we are perpetrating, most of our gestures (a bit of recycling, a bit less driving, turning down the heat or AC, sending a check to the Sierra Club) seem to serve only to relieve our guilty conscience or mask our growing feeling of impotence. Nothing much is happening, at any rate, to halt our downward plunge. (Pearce, 2004, p. xv)

Few people can say that they have experienced a day where they did more good for the Earth than bad. Western culture relies on short-lived technologies that cause the environment immense stress through manufacturing and use. Hyperactive lifestyles spent in climate-controlled environments are the norm, leading to a culture that has no connection to or understanding of the world on which its existence relies. Backcountry expeditions are a rare chance for students to experience wilderness and the wonders associated with it,

and to leave modern society's schedule behind. Yet it seems that too often outdoor experiences are based on a large quantity of experiences, rather than fewer, quality ones. No time for exploring, no time for playing, and no time immersed in lessons of place based on direct sensory experience. Often by trying to fit in too much, we end up rushing past many of the reasons why we love these experiences and places so much, failing to facilitate meaningful connections. As educators, leaders, guides and role models, we must evaluate what it is that we want to accomplish, identify what we are accomplishing, and continue to set loftier goals (though in some ways this may actually mean doing less).

Encouraging children to get outside and have positive experiences is great, but we can do more. Teaching in the outdoors is worthy, but we can do more. Group dynamics, activity based skills, and leadership development are very important outcomes of outdoor education, but we must do more. Children of all ages need opportunities to let their imaginations work, to play and to rediscover their senses. Lessons need to incorporate direct experiences with many aspects of the environment, utilize a wide range of senses, and be free from the cultural routines that shape most of our days. And, back at school, lessons must refocus on naturalist studies and reintroduce natural history as a part of everyday experience, rather than allow those subjects to linger near extinction.

According to Walsch (2005), wisdom is knowledge applied. As I learn more about the world around me through traditional skills and philosophies, I have begun to understand this statement. Traditional cultures are based upon lessons learned over thousands of generations. There is wisdom in this. Modern cultures are based upon lessons learned over a much shorter time span, knowledge that has yet to withstand the test of time. Newer often does not mean better or more successful. My

expedition experiences suggest to me that being open to ancient wisdom and finding ways to integrate it within a modern context can lead to profound connections between students and the life that surrounds them. The more we can learn from and blend ancient teachings and philosophies in ways that fit our lives, the better able we will be to live (and teach others to live) with the Earth, rather than just on it.

### Many Thanks

To the Earth, my teachers, and to you for your work and your passion, past, present and future, thank you.

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